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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 06 MANAMA 001953

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [KISL](#) [BA](#) [POL](#) [REFORM](#)
SUBJECT: CANDIDATES FOCUS ON LOCAL ISSUES WHILE SPECTER OF
SECTARIAN PARLIAMENT LOOMS

REF: A. MANAMA 1942
[¶B.](#) MANAMA 1912
[¶C.](#) MANAMA 1887
[¶D.](#) MANAMA 1870
[¶E.](#) MANAMA 1728

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary

[¶1.](#) (C) Two hundred seven candidates are contesting Bahrain's parliamentary elections to be held November 25 and December

[¶2.](#) In the run-up to the elections, campaign tents, posters and billboards have blossomed around the country and candidates host events nightly for constituents to get to know them and become familiar with their platforms. The focus is on local issues such as housing, education, employment, sanitation, and health care, with incumbents defending their record of delivering services to their districts while challengers attack. There is a strong anti-incumbent feeling among citizens, who complain that they are no better off than they were four years ago, when the current parliament was formed.

[¶2.](#) (C) Summary continued: Although complaints about the fairness of the elections continue to be aired, the conduct of the elections was fundamentally improved by the government's actions in the aftermath of the Bandar report, which accused a senior Royal Family member of attempting to influence the outcome of elections in favor of Sunni candidates who are friendly to the government. The accused minister was removed from any role in conducting the elections, the King decided not to use a controversial e-voting system, and the government is allowing local independent election monitors to operate. However, the information minister announced November 21 that Bahrain rejects the presence of international monitors and declared that the elections will be fair and above-board.

[¶3.](#) (C) Summary continued: It is difficult to predict the outcome of the elections, but we expect leading Shia opposition society Al Wifaq to win about 14 seats while its ally the liberal, secular Al Waad society and similar-minded independents may win three seats, together forming the largest bloc but representing just under half of the 40 seats. The Sunni Islamist Al Minbar and Al Asala societies may each win five seats with a mix of independents - pro-government, Sunni Islamists, unassociated Shias, and others - making up the remaining 13 seats. Although the new parliament will have many more religious figures, both Sunni and Shia, raising the potential of a considerably more conservative legislature, many observers believe that the overriding feature will be the pursuit of two entirely

different agendas, by the Sunni Islamists (Shariah law) and the Shia/oppositionists (social issues, constitutional reform), which could exacerbate already existing sectarian tensions. End Summary.

207 Candidates for 40 Parliamentary Seats

¶4. (C) Bahrain will hold parliamentary and municipal elections November 25 and December 2 for the second time since the establishment of the 2002 constitution. The country is broken into forty districts and each district will vote for one member of parliament and one member of a municipal council. (Note: In the 2002 elections, the parliamentary districts were different from the municipal districts, but they have been unified for the 2006 elections.) The number of voters in each district varies substantially, from the district comprising the southeastern reaches of Bahrain with 1,175 voters to a district outside the city of Manama with almost 15,500 voters. To win a seat in either the elected lower house of parliament Council of Representatives (COR) or the five municipal councils, a candidate needs to obtain one vote more than 50% of ballots cast. If no candidate wins a majority in the first round on November 25, the top two vote-getters will compete in a run-off on December 2. No firm date is set yet for the new parliament to convene, but a professional staff member at the COR told Emboffs it could happen in mid-December, to coincide with the opening date of the last parliament in 2002, or following the Eid Al Adha holiday in early January. The 40 members of the upper house of parliament, the Shura Council, will all be appointed by the King.

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¶5. (C) At the conclusion of the candidate registration period in mid-October, 221 candidates, 18 of whom are women, nominated themselves to compete for the 40 COR seats. Since that time, 14 candidates have dropped out of the parliamentary race, leaving 207 remaining. (In late October, 171 candidates, including five women, registered to compete for the 40 seats in the five municipal councils.) Of the 40 members of the last COR, 28 are running for re-election, although two prominent members, Second Deputy Chair Shaikh Adel Al Moawada and legislative committee member Farid Ghazi, both changed their districts to improve their chances for winning. Candidates are running either as members of a political society list or independents. The major societies are Shia opposition Al Wifaq, with 17 candidates; Sunni Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Al Minbar Al Islami, with eight candidates; centrist, moderate, non-sectarian Al Meethaq, with six candidates; secular opposition Al Waad, with six candidates; and Sunni Salafi Al Asala, with six candidates.

Political Activity in Run-Up to Elections

¶6. (C) Bahrain is known among regional countries for being politically active, and the events of the past four weeks have reaffirmed this reputation. Campaign tents, posters, and flyers have blossomed, filling vacant lots, billboards, and roadside median strips and shoulders. The tents are open to all every night and represent an opportunity for constituents to interact directly with the candidates. Emboffs have observed lectures featuring guest speakers covering issues such as economic development, trade and investment, and Islamic Shariah law; unformatted question-and-answer sessions with candidates; and small roundtable discussions on national and local conditions. To liven things up, one candidate organized a children's night, with neighborhood kids playing games led by party organizers and watching a film on the candidate's projection screen. The candidates offer visitors coffee, tea, soft drinks, and sweets, and some offer full hot meals. A recent newspaper

cartoon shows two overweight citizens complaining that because of the food offered by candidates, they had both regained weight lost during the month of Ramadan.

All Politics is Local

17. (C) The overriding theme of candidates' election campaigns is local issues. As the presence of an elected parliamentary chamber is a relatively new phenomenon, many citizens have high, often unrealistic, expectations of an MP's ability to deliver services, and so are asking pointed questions about incumbents' achievements, and challengers' plans, to improve the standard of living in the district. COR First Deputy Chair Abdul Hadi Marhoon told Emboffs that only five constituents have asked his views of the constitution whereas a thousand have asked about his track record in delivering housing, sanitation, health care, employment, and education. For some candidates, this focus on bread-and-butter issues moves them out of their comfort zones. Al Waad candidate Munira Fakhro, a prominent university professor and member of one of the country's richest merchant families, and Al Wifaq candidate Jassim Hussein, a Ph.D. economist and frequent contributor to national and international media and journals, have commented separately to Emboffs that the campaign has opened their eyes to the living conditions and concerns of a swath of society with which they had very little contact previously.

18. (C) Despite the sectarian reality pervading almost all aspects of Bahraini politics, the message coming through in candidates' advertising and pronouncements centers on the unity of Bahrainis and Muslims. The initiative of local blogger Mahmoud Al Yousef of "www.mahmood.tv" best symbolizes this focus on unity. He has organized the manufacture and distribution of buttons bearing the phrase, in English or Arabic, "No Shi'i, No Sunni, Just Bahraini." Candidates' campaign posters bear phrases such as "Only for the Nation," "For the Sake of the Nation and All Its Children," and "One People, One Nation." Even conservative Salafi candidate Shaikh Adel Al Moawada gave a lecture on the need for all Arabs and Muslims to unite around the unifying Shariah law, and blamed divisions within Muslims on the meddling of foreigners, especially the British and Americans. (Note: He cut short his harangue of the United States when he noticed Emboff in the audience and graciously welcomed "our visitor from the U.S. Embassy.")

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Incumbents on the Defensive

19. (C) Perhaps as a result of incumbents' inability to deliver on previous campaign promises, there is a strong anti-incumbent feeling among citizens. Bahrainis' notion of the role of parliamentarians and even municipal council members is not sophisticated - their job is to deliver government-funded services to the community. (Comment: A reference at this point to pork-barrel politics seems inappropriate in this conservative Muslim country.) While a minority, including the educated elite, disgruntled Shia youth, and Islamist conservatives, is receptive to messages about larger issues such as constitutional reform or fuller implementation of Shariah law, the large majority of Bahrainis are worried about their standard of living and candidates' ability to improve this standard. Challengers are exploiting this restiveness, publicly criticizing incumbents for not paying close enough attention to their constituents during their four years in office. Of course, incumbents have the benefit of name recognition and can easily distinguish themselves from a sometimes large group of rivals. But voter unhappiness with the performance of incumbents, along with other factors, is likely to result in

many sitting members losing their positions.

Pressure on Some Shia Candidates to Withdraw

¶10. (C) The decision of the four formerly boycotting political societies - Al Wifaq, Al Waad, and two small organizations - to participate in this year's election has put into jeopardy the candidacies of Shia members of the previous parliament. Al Wifaq and Al Waad, which proudly proclaim themselves to be oppositionists, paint incumbents and other moderate rivals as being government collaborators. There are numerous reports of Al Wifaq pressuring competing Shia candidates to withdraw from the elections, and several have done so.

¶11. (C) Independent Shia MP Jassim Abdul Aal, who achieved local renown for his grueling negotiations with the government on the budget and his organization of a campaign to remove a wall erected by a Royal Family member that blocked his constituents from accessing the beach where their fishing boats are moored, announced his decision to withdraw from the election in early November. Only days later, he reversed the decision reportedly in response to the pleas of constituents and supporters. He said he had taken the decision to withdraw to promote "unity within the community," and this move would have allowed the Al Wifaq candidate to run with no serious competition. Independent Shia candidate Dr. Jameela Al Sammak told Emboffs that Al Wifaq representatives were applying serious pressure for her to withdraw, which she refuses to do. During Emboffs' visit to her tent, she pointed out the Al Wifaq envoys who had once again come to demand her withdrawal. Even Al Sammak doubts her candidacy represents much of a threat to the Al Wifaq nominee, raising questions about Al Wifaq's motives in trying to snuff out competing campaigns.

Improved Election Process Post-Bandar Report

¶12. (C) The conduct of the elections was fundamentally altered, for the better, by steps the government has taken in the aftermath of the Bandar report's accusations that a senior member of the Royal Family was engaged in a complex conspiracy to influence the outcome of parliamentary elections in favor of Sunni candidates friendly to the government (Ref E). Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs and President of the Central Informatics Organization (CIO) Shaikh Ahmed bin Attiyatallah Al Khalifa allegedly distributed over \$2.5 million to a newspaper, NGOs, individual candidates, and others to boost the electoral prospects of pro-government Sunnis while seeking to undermine the candidacies of oppositionists. Shaikh Ahmed offered a vigorous public defense of his actions while denying any implied manipulation of the political system, and the government has never addressed the issue, saying it is a matter for the courts to deal with. Following several weeks of allegations and commentary, a court ruled that all media outlets, including blogs, had to cease publishing anything about the case and remove any previous pieces from their on-line archives.

¶13. (C) After his public defense of his actions in late September, Shaikh Ahmed fell silent. Word spread that he

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went "on vacation" outside the country, and since his return he has kept a very low profile. The government took, and publicly announced, the decision to remove the CIO from any executive or implementation role in the elections. Its sole remaining responsibility was to provide all candidates with census information about their constituents and constituencies. (Note: Even this remains controversial. Oppositionists complain that they received only bare-bones

hard-copy information while alleging that candidates friendly to the government received complete data packs loaded on CDs.) In response to widespread calls and criticism, King Hamad decided not to use a CIO-developed e-voting system.

¶14. (C) Reversing a long-held and publicly declared policy, the government engaged civil society to develop an election observation scheme that was acceptable to both sides. The Bahrain Transparency Society (BTS), Bahrain Human Rights Society, and several other NGOs are organizing teams of local independent monitors that will fan out across Bahrain on the election days. Information Minister Mohammed Abdul Ghaffar announced November 21 while opening an elections media center that Bahrain rejects the presence of international monitors for the elections. He wondered why Arabs "always bring in foreigners to supervise us as if we are underage" and declared that the elections will be fair and above-board.

Opposition Complains of General Poll Centers

¶15. (C) The two primary outstanding controversial issues related to the conduct of the elections, from the opposition's perspective, are the plan to use ten "general" polling centers for out-of-district voters and rumors of a "floating" bloc of voters that will be deployed to districts with close races involving pro-government candidates. The opposition fears that the general centers, at which residents of any district in Bahrain can vote, might be used for nefarious purposes that would be impossible to carry out at a local voting center, where almost all voters are recognized and known. The general center of greatest concern is the one located very close to the causeway to Saudi Arabia. Many Saudi citizens with roots in Bahrain, including members of the Al Dossari tribe, hold Bahraini passports and can vote in Bahraini elections. The opposition's working assumption is that these dual nationals have no residence in Bahrain and that the government assigns them addresses in districts with mixed Sunni-Shia populations to bolster the Sunni candidates. They are expected to vote at the causeway voting center rather than at local centers, where they would be recognized as outsiders. Despite many requests by opposition and non-opposition leaders alike, the government has not budged from its plan to use the general centers.

¶16. (C) The other outstanding issue is the opposition claim that there is a "floating" bloc of some 8,000 newly naturalized citizens who also do not have fixed addresses registered with the government. Like with the Saudi dual nationals, oppositionists fear these voters could be deployed to sway election results in close races. The government has denied the existence of floating voters and has challenged proponents of the theory to show some proof of their claims. BTS Chairman Jassim Al Ajmi told Poloff November 21 that the High Election Commission's publicly announced plan to publish the names of all those who voted immediately following the elections would go a long way to address concerns about the general polling centers and the alleged "floating" bloc.

Boycott, Apathy, Weather to Impact Turn-Out

¶17. (C) In a recent poll of 1,167 Bahrainis carried out by the official election website, 60% said they would vote in the elections, 32% said they would not, and 8% were not sure. The 32% includes a mix of people who will not vote - boycotters, the apathetic, and those who will not be able to get to the polling centers for one reason or another. Another factor that will influence participation is the weather, which has been unusually cool and rainy. The extended forecast for November 25 predicts mostly cloudy weather, temperatures between 66 and 71 degrees, and with a chance of rain in the evening. In a country with few weather shelters other than canvas awnings to provide shade from the sun, voters may decide not to venture out into the relatively cool and possibly wet weather to vote.

¶18. (C) Although all registered political societies are participating in the elections, the Shia rejectionist Haq Movement continues to advocate a boycott of the elections.

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Their voice has been muted, reportedly as a result of a "gentlemen's agreement" between Haq and Al Wifaq in which each side agreed not to publicly criticize the position of the other during the election period. However, Al Wifaq was concerned enough about a boycott in two predominantly Shia towns in the Central Governorate that leading Shia cleric Shaikh Isa Qassem paid them a visit on November 2 to urge citizens to vote. Al Wifaq reportedly is worried that if enough people boycott, a non-Al Wifaq candidate may win.

Opposition to Fall Short of Majority in COR

¶19. (C) There is too short a track record on elections in Bahrain and too many wild card factors to make any accurate predictions about the outcome of the elections. However, summarizing the views of our contacts, we believe oppositionists - Al Wifaq, Al Waad, and allied independents - will fall a few seats short of a majority of the COR. Of the 40 seats, Al Wifaq is expected to win about 14 while Al Waad and independents associated with the opposition may win three. The Sunni Islamist societies, Al Minbar and Al Asala, have formed an alliance for the elections and should win about ten of the 13 contests they are contesting, or five seats for each society. Independents will take the bulk of the remaining 13 seats. The independents represent a mixed bag of political trends. There are pro-government candidates (e.g., Lateefa Al Qaoud, who has already won a seat as she is running unopposed), several Sunni Islamists (e.g., Southern Governorate MP Jassim Al Saeedi), a patriarchal figure (current COR Chairman Khalifa Al Dhahrani) and perhaps a few unassociated Shia. Centrist, moderate groupings such as Al Meethaq and the Democratic Progressive Tribunal may eke out a seat or two.

Sectarian, Not Islamist, Parliament

¶20. (C) Some 70% of the members of the new COR are likely to be associated with Islamic societies (Al Wifaq, Al Minbar, Al Asala) or be self-declared independent Islamists (Al Saeedi), and several of the new MPs will be religious clerics, raising the potential of a considerably more conservative legislature. However, many observers believe the overriding feature of the Council will be the pursuit of two entirely different agendas by the major power centers - the Sunni Islamists, on one side, and the Shia and other oppositionists, on the other. Al Minbar and Al Asala seek to continue their efforts in the previous parliament to introduce greater compliance with Shariah law into Bahraini society while Al Wifaq and Al Waad have publicly emphasized their planned legislative focus on social welfare services, economic development, and employment wage growth, and constitutional reform. Legislative actions to promote these two non-intersecting agendas could exacerbate already existing Sunni-Shia sectarian tensions in the country. (Note: Privately, some Al Wifaq leaders have admitted that they may be forced to vote in favor of the Sunnis' religiously oriented non-binding "iqtirah bi raghba" proposals, akin to a Sense of the Congress resolution, to demonstrate their adherence to Islamic principles, but they have emphasized their rejection of the Sunni Islamists' focus on religious issues at the expense of national and social issues.)

¶21. (C) Given the likelihood of this sect-based dynamic, there are already allegations that the government will seek to "keep the parliament busy" by having friendly Sunnis

introduce controversial measures that will stoke sectarian friction. It remains to be seen whether this will happen. But in this election period, a group of candidates that have attracted some attention, both positive and negative, are Sunni candidates allied with the opposition Al Wifaq. Al Waad society President Ibrahim Sharif and candidates Munira Fakhro, Abdul Rahman Al Nuaimi, and Sami Siadi, and independent candidate Abdul Aziz Abul, are all secular Sunnis who are in full agreement with Al Wifaq's focus on social issues and constitutional reform. Sharif, Fakhro, and Abul have described to Emboffs the nasty messages they have seen complaining about their alliance with Shia oppositionists and smearing them personally. In contrast with these accusations, Sharif and Abul told us they see themselves as possibly serving as a bridge between the two sects, removing some of the sectarian overtones of legislative proposals.

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